

When selecting a bit, the horse's conformation and temperament, plus the rider's experience and ambitions, should all be taken into account



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The horse reluctant to take a contact



Barney naturally has a high head carriage

Horse's name: Barney
Age and breeding: 10, Gelderlander
Height: 17.1hh
Rider's name: Victoria Sturges
Discipline: general riding horse, hacking, dressage
Wearing: a single-jointed four-ring gag

THE Gelderlander is built for carriage driving, so Barney's conformation makes it easy for him to carry his head high and drop back behind the bridle. Add to this the fact that he is partial to the occasional spin and spook while out hacking, which means Victoria often has her work cut out encouraging him to stay forward into a secure, even contact.

On the advice of her previous yard owner, Victoria has been riding Barney in a four-ring gag.

Hilary explains that, while Victoria might feel she has greater control, the bit does not encourage him to relax, soften and

take the contact forward. "Hold out your hand. Can you feel it pinching when I squeeze the sides together?" asks Hilary. "That's what the bit is doing on either side of his jawbone. So when you pull on the reins, he will try and find a way to avoid the pinching pressure."

Hilary wants to try two bits on Barney to gauge what sort of pressure he best responds to.

First, she tries an Informed Designs Symmetry eggbutt snaffle. This has a curved, fixed mouthpiece with plenty of tongue and jaw room.

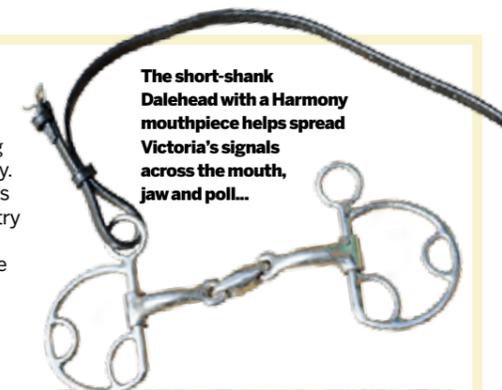
Barney responds well to it, but Hilary feels that, given the pair's history, something that offers a bit more control and clearer signals might be better.

► **The solution:** a short-shank Dalehead with a 14mm Harmony mouthpiece.

The Harmony mouthpiece has a smooth, lozenge-shaped link in the middle. It avoids pinching and gives an even pressure across the tongue and lower jaw to encourage the horse to take a more consistent, forward contact.

The Dalehead cheek has a balanced leverage action that gives three different rein options, depending on the required degree of poll pressure. It is used with a high curb strap — which can be elastic, leather or chain depending on the amount of control you need — that spreads the pressure and the rider's signals more evenly between the mouth, the jaw and the poll.

Hilary says: "I have chosen a slightly fatter mouthpiece [14mm] than I might do normally to make sure there is plenty of surface contact between the bit and the mouth and to give



The short-shank Dalehead with a Harmony mouthpiece helps spread Victoria's signals across the mouth, jaw and poll...



...which results in a happier, softer contact

Victoria more control when he spins. For dressage we can substitute the same dressage-legal mouthpiece on a snaffle cheek."

Victoria says: "I feel like Barney wants to take the contact forward and that I have 'more horse' at the end of the rein. I liked the feeling he gave me in the snaffle, but I like the second bit even more. It's a win-win situation, because Barney's more comfortable and I have more control."

Does your bit really fit?

“W

spend a lot of time and money making sure that our horse's

saddles, boots, bridles and other pieces of kit fit perfectly,” says biting clinician Hilary Vernon. “But when it comes to bits, we often tend to forget about ergonomics and conformation.”

Mother Nature did not design a groove for a bit to sit, therefore whatever we choose to place in our horses' mouths must sit comfortably between the tongue and the roof of the mouth — two structures designed to fit perfectly together.

How many riders struggle to know which bit to ride in? When *H&H* sent a top biting clinician to a competition yard in Surrey to assess suitability and best practice, the findings were fascinating

Bit design is constantly evolving to take into greater account the subtleties and complexities of horses' mouths and their riders' experience and ambitions. There are now myriad types of mouthpieces, cheeks and materials.

We are spending the day at Parkview Equestrian Centre in Surrey, a competition and

livery yard housing all sorts of equines. Hilary has come to cast her eye over the yard's inmates (and a few visitors), to assess their bits for suitability and suggest substitutions that could benefit the horse's comfort and way of going.

So, what did our examinations reveal?

The sensitive-mouthed eventer



Rosie has a tendency to tilt her head. Her small mouth (inset) means the joints in her French-link snaffle are putting pressure on her lips, which is not helping

Horse's name: Rosie
Age and breeding: 12, Irish sport horse
Height: 16.1hh
Rider's name: Lucy Higginson
Disciplines: eventing, hunting
Wearing: a loose-ring French link

ROSIE is a sensitive mare who finds it difficult to stay in a steady, round outline on the flat and has a tendency to become strong and charge off in front of fences.

Lucy says: "I have used a rubber pelham on

her in the past for cross-country. Lucinda Green suggested at a recent clinic that I try a Dr Bristol — which had no effect — and then a Nathe bit that used jaw and nose pressure. She went better in the latter, which made me think that perhaps she prefers a non-metal bit.

Hilary watches Lucy ride in the school and then assesses Rosie's mouth conformation.

"Rosie is obviously a sensitive mare and,

Tell-tale signs:

what your horse's biting conformation tells you about him

► **The temperal mandible joint (TMJ)**
 This is where the front of the horse's head joins the lower jawbone and it is a good indication of tension. If a horse is tense, you can hardly push your finger into the space at all. If he is relaxed, it will feel spongy and soft.

► **The cheeks**
 There should be a nice, subtle lacing of muscle down either side of the cheeks. With a strong horse, you can find solid big ribs of muscle along either side. This is an indication that he could be strong in the bridle. Better developed muscle on one side than the other could mean he is stronger on one rein.

► **Inside of the mouth**
 Some horses will have flat, wide jaws, while others have a nice curve. This will dictate how much bit room you have. Horses with shallow lower jaws don't have as much room to dip their tongues down out of the way of the bit, so are likely to dislike chunky mouthpieces.

► **The neck muscles**
 The neck bone arcs down into the horse's body cavity and much of the weight of the head and neck is held up by muscles and ligature. Although we want the horse to work in a nice frame, it is important that he reaches forward into the bridle and doesn't hold his neck tight. If he is comfortable in his mouth, this will be easier to achieve.



Making Rosie more comfortable in her mouth has improved her rideability to a fence

although she is 16.1hh, she only takes a 5in bit," she explains. "She has a small mouth and a very shallow bottom jaw, so there's actually not a lot of room in there."

Hilary notices that the loose-ring French-link snaffle Lucy is currently using has a long centre plate, which, because of Rosie's mouth conformation, means the joints sit in the corners of her lips.

"I think this is partly the reason for her inconsistent frame and head movement," says Hilary. "It could also be the reason for her rushing in front of the fences — to escape the pressure on her lips."



► **The solution:** an Informed Designs Flat Symmetry eggbutt snaffle (left).

"This bit is neatly contoured to fit a small, fussy, busy mouth," explains Hilary. "While a loose-ring snaffle has a slightly delayed effect, the eggbutt is more direct, which gives a slicker, quicker signal."

Lucy puts Rosie through her paces in the bit.

"You are not going to see a huge difference immediately, but there are tell-tale signs that she is starting to move her head less," says Hilary.

Lucy is not completely convinced, so Hilary lets her try another bit, a Harmony hanging cheek snaffle with a lozenge, rather than a straight mouthpiece. Both Hilary and Lucy agree that Rosie prefers the first bit.

Although Hilary advocates spending at least five sessions gently allowing the horse to get used to a new bit, for the purposes of this article, Lucy gives Rosie a jump over a small cross-pole.

She keeps an even canter into the fence and there is no sign of her wanting to rush or charge off.

Hilary points out that, although finding a material that the horse likes is advantageous, selecting the right mouthpiece has to be the primary concern.

"If you can find a mouthpiece that suits the horse, then you can always change the cheeks to something that gives you a bit more control if you need it," she says.

Lucy says: "Although it is difficult recreating the scenario where she might charge into a fence in a familiar arena, Rosie does seem a lot more settled in this mouthpiece."

The canny hunter with a tendency to bolt

Horse's name: Pride
Age and breeding: 8, Irish sport horse
Height: 16.3hh
Rider's name: Alannah Cochrane
Discipline: hacking, dressage
Wearing: full-cheek French-link snaffle (for schooling) and a W-mouth polo gag (for hacking)



Pride likes to take control — a problem that is probably not helped by an uncomfortable bit

IN a previous life, Pride was a hunt horse in Ireland. He is used to going in straight lines at a speed that suits him. When Alannah took him on six months ago, he came with a large polo gag, which she was told he wore for hunting.

Hilary points out that the poorly constructed French-link snaffle Alannah uses for flat work has very long, knobby joints in the middle. They dig into the tongue and the roof of the mouth when pressure is applied. The W-shaped polo gag lifts up the horse's lips in the direction of his ears and has a very severe pinching action. Neither is ideal.



"For hacking, I'd love to be able to find something that's not as harsh, but that still allows me to stop him when he bolts," says Alannah.

Having watched the pair walk, trot and canter in the school, Hilary makes an initial assessment.

"He takes control in the canter, particularly on the left rein," she observes. "He looks like he has learned to carry himself that way to avoid uncomfortable bits. Even with a strong horse, it's important to find a bit that's as comfortable as possible so he is rewarded when he is being light and responsive."

► **The solution:** an Edgeware bit with a Harmony mouthpiece (above).

Hilary says: "The Harmony mouthpiece is the same as we had in Barney, but it is a slightly slimmer version [12mm] to accommodate Pride's smaller mouth and his large tongue, which is bulging out either side of his mouth."

The Edgeware cheeks give Alannah leverage

and they have a release and reward action that is comfortable for Pride, but gives Alannah greater control when she needs it. It is worn with a chain or elastic curb strap.

The transformation in Pride is remarkable.

"He is cantering round in a much better frame and is not being at all strong," observes Hilary. "As a result, Alannah is noticeably more relaxed in her posture, which creates a completely different overall picture."

Alannah says: "He is so much lighter in my hand and so relaxed. I feel like I have a different horse."



The release and reward action of the leverage bit encourages him to stay soft and relaxed

What bit is best for...

► A horse that leans

"ASK yourself why the horse is leaning," says Hilary. "Is it a training issue? Is he a young horse who hasn't yet found his balance? Or is the rider hanging on?"

In every case, the priority is to ensure the horse is comfortable in its mouth.

"Choose something that has a bit of interest in the middle," advises Hilary. "For example, a Rotary bit, one with small balls or a flat double joint. These mouthpieces will discourage the horse from setting himself against the bit."

► A horse that's too light in the hand

"IT is important to remember that a horse uses his tongue as a feeler. He has to feel something nice in his mouth to encourage him to reach out forward and not duck behind the bit and away from the contact," says Hilary, who recommends an unjointed mouthpiece to give the horse something constant and comfortable to go forwards into.

"Something like a Symmetry bit with a solid mouthpiece would be my first choice," she says.

► A puller

IT is important to differentiate between a horse who's leaning and one who is simply strong.

"Even if the horse is a puller, it's still important to make him comfortable in his mouth," says Hilary. "Every signal you give needs to count and it needs to be clear and concise. I like to use something with a bit of leverage so that the signals the rider gives are spread over a wide area — something that puts a bit of pressure on the poll, the jaw and the mouth."

The dressage horse lacking flexibility and lightness



Being a stallion, Midnight has strong neck muscles, which he sometimes uses against Rachel

Horse's name: Midnight De Saussay
Age and breeding: 14, selle Français
Height: 16.3hh
Rider's name: Rachael Daniel
Discipline: dressage
Wearing: loose-ring lozenge snaffle

BEFORE Rachael acquired Midnight, he had showjumped up to 1.50m level in France and had been trained to a high level in dressage.

Rachel is still learning to find the right buttons to press and, although Midnight knows the ropes, he is not always as round and flexible in the contact as he might be. Hilary explains that, being a stallion, he has a very strong, muscular neck, which he sometimes uses against Rachael.

She also notices that Midnight has built up more cheek muscle down the right-hand side of his face than the left — a sign that he might work slightly unevenly into the contact.

➤ **The solution:** Hilary tries two different bits with two types of mouthpieces on Midnight — a loose-ring Double Ball Rotary snaffle, which has two baubles in the middle, and a loose-ring snaffle with a Response mouthpiece (above right).

The latter is slightly curved with a flat plate constructed so that it makes contact with the centre of the tongue only. This discourages the horse from resting on it. Both bits are British Dressage legal.

Midnight seems to like both, though the transformation in his way of going isn't quite as noticeable as with Barney or Pride.

After Rachael rides for a while longer, she and Hilary decide on the Response mouthpiece.

"The horse appears lighter in the bridle and in a better frame," notices Hilary. "The loose-ring cheek allows for a small delay to each rein



This Response mouthpiece is designed to make contact with the centre of the tongue only

signal and has a slightly looser feel than an eggbutt, which is good in a strong horse that can use the power in its neck to set against you and become strong."

Rachael says: "I am still getting to know Midnight and he is far more advanced than I am. But I can feel him start to become softer and rounder in the bits Hilary put him in, especially in the second one."



Midnight becomes lighter in the hand in his new bit

Tongue talk

Did you know...

➤ Your horse's tongue is huge — a pony's can be 9-11in in length, while a horse's can be up to 17in.

It extends from his mouth up towards his eye (inset), where it turns into the long throat muscles that travel down his neck and into the sternum.

Any amount of discomfort from the bit will therefore impact upon a horse's way of going, movement and athleticism.

If you see the tongue poking out the front or side of your horse's mouth, it is a sign that he may be uncomfortable. If he tries to stretch it down into his jaw out the way of the bit, it might poke out the front. Or if he turns it sideways, it can stick out the side or even end up over the top of the bit.



How to trial a bit

WE are all guilty of trying a new bit and wanting an instant result, but it takes time for a horse to become accustomed to a new sensation in his mouth. Therefore it is extremely difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of a new bit immediately.

"I always tell people to have five easy sessions in a new bit. Start by allowing the horse to walk around on a long rein to enable him to feel every part of the bit without being put under pressure," says Hilary.

"I want a rider to try a new bit 20 times before they make any sort of judgement on it. Taking a horse straight out cross-country schooling in a new bit is in neither your own nor your horse's best interests."



Allow the horse to become fully accustomed to a new bit before asking for too much

With thanks to...

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